



UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Driven to DiscoverSM

Sandra Benítez

Biography

Sandra Benítez was born Sandy Ables on March 26, 1941 in Washington, D.C. She claims Midwestern (her father was from the American Midwest) and Puerto Rican (her mother was Puerto Rican) descent. As Benítez describes, she lived her childhood in Mexico and El Salvador where her father served as a diplomat in the Foreign Service. While her friends were from the upper-class, Benítez was often privy to the personal stories of the women who worked as servants in her house. Early on, Benítez found the gap between the haves and the have-nots to be disquieting and perplexing. This class disparity would prove to be the main theme of her writing (personal communication with the author).

When she was fourteen she was sent north to live with her grandparents and become “Americanized.” She went to high school and college in Missouri. She graduated from Northeast Missouri State University with a B.S. in 1962 and an M.A. in 1974. She is married to James Kondrick and has two children from a previous marriage. Benítez did not start writing until she was 39. Prior to becoming a writer, she had a variety of jobs, including teaching Spanish and working as a translator and corporate trainer. In 1979, she left her job and began attending a creative writing course. Her first novel, a murder mystery set in Missouri, was never published. She brought the novel to a writer’s conference, where she was told it was terrible. After doing some personal reflection, she decided to change her name to Benítez, her mother’s maiden name, and focus her writings on her Latina heritage.



Quick Facts

- * Born in 1941
- * Grew up in Mexico and El Salvador
- * First published novel is *A Place Where the Sea Remembers*

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Sandra Benítez

Biography continued

Her first published novel, *A Place Where the Sea Remembers* (1993), received the Barnes and Noble Discover Award and the Minnesota Book Award. This relatively short but compelling story takes place in the poor Mexican fishing village of Santiago. Chayo, a flowermaker, and Candelario, a salad-maker, who are childless, have agreed to adopt the baby of Chayo's sister, Marta, who was raped. But everything changes when Candelario loses his job and Chayo discovers she is pregnant. The novel is filled with many interesting characters, such as Remedios, *la curandera* (healer), and Esperanza, the midwife.

Benítez is at her best when writing about the people in the country of her youth, El Salvador. When reading Benítez, one is struck by her ability to give a clear and thoughtful voice to people on both sides of the economic and political world of El Salvador. We first see this in her second novel, *Bitter Grounds* (1997). Benítez helps us to understand El Salvador from the points of view of the oppressed and the privileged. *Bitter Grounds* tells of the lives of two families and their generations of mothers and daughters living in El Salvador in the mid 1900s. One of the families is part of the wealthy and elite Salvadoran society, while the other is on the opposite end of the scale. Although the lives of these families seem opposed, Benítez depicts their many similarities. The book moves from the everyday experiences to the very dramatic life issues that these women face.

In her third novel, Benítez once again draws upon her experiences in El Salvador to give voice to a young boy growing up in war-torn El Salvador. *The Weight of All Things* begins with the death of nine-year-old Nicolas Veras' mother. Not realizing immediately that she is dead, he sets off on a journey across El Salvador to find her. Instead of finding his mother on his quest, he becomes entangled in the battleground of El Salvador, caught between the army and the guerrillas. The novel follows the thoughts of Nicolas as he slowly comes to the realization that his mother is dead.



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Biography continued

“So many children lost their parents, their grandparents, their families during the war in El Salvador,” Benítez writes. By starting off with the death of Nicolas’ mother, the novel “creates a different kind of tension. I wanted to tell the story of a boy who had such a great loss.” Benítez aims to stay neutral when writing about the politics of El Salvador and the war. This stems from her upbringing and being surrounded by both the upper class and the lower class and hearing their stories. “I was literally caught in the middle,” Benítez says. “I wanted to bring out the reality of both sides. I want people to know it happened. I want them to know the reality of it. I want them to know the everyday life, the conflict, because that is what is important to us.”

The writings of Sandra Benítez focus on the civil war in El Salvador. She examines this war by writing about the everyday life of people of different classes and how their lives intersect and diverge in El Salvador. Through this examination of daily life of the poor and the privileged, she shows how the civil war occurred in El Salvador and the toll it took on both sides. Although she is careful not to take sides, her writings demonstrate the great suffering of the people in the lower economic classes in El Salvador.

Her fourth novel is *The Night of the Radishes*. Benítez’s work has been translated into Spanish, French, Italian, German, Dutch, and Portuguese, as well as published in Great Britain.



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Selected Bibliography

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Works in languages other than English

Spanish

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Aroma de café amargo (Bitter Grounds), trans. Nora Watson (Plaza & Janés, 2001).

Allí donde el mar recuerda: una novela, trans. Susana Benítez Lacy (Plaza & Janés Editores, 1999).

French

Terres amères: roman, trans. Nicole Hibert (Albin Michel, 2000).